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AUTHOR Dumas, Bethany K.
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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the issue of whether and how data from dialect surveys provide insights into women's language. The Linguistic Atlas projects of the United States and Canada, the Dictionary of American English project, the Arkansas Language Survey and smaller projects are considered; and it is stated that in order to get at conversational interaction, only interviews which are truly conversational in nature should be used. The research reported is based on twenty tapes made in Newton County, Arkansas in 1970, and specifically on interviews with two elderly married couples. The working hypotheses, similar to those of Hirschman (1972) and Eubanks (1975), are: (1) males talk more than females in conversational situations, (2) males tend to control conversations by signalling beginnings and ends of conversations, (3) males make more judgmental, analytical statements, (4) males and females signal their perceived roles by the use of standard and non-standard verbal forms, and (5) females make more rewarding and encouraging remarks, or show agreement or indecision. Results at this stage of the research indicate that rules for conversation in interview situations should be determined before differences on male-female conversational interaction cues are defined, since the interviewee's perception of his or her role in the interview as the primary or supplementary informant affects the interview, independent of sex. (CLK)

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MALE-FEMALE CONVERSATIONAL INTERACTION CUES: USING DATA FROM DIALECT SURVEYS

By

Bethany K. Dumas

The University of Tennessee--Knoxville

Research into women's language is a relatively new area of serious study, and it has begun to come of age at a time when investigators have had at their disposal refined methodological techniques, particularly those developed by Labov and his associates during the last decade or so, and rather sophisticated electronic equipment. It is a tribute to the seriousness of purpose of many researchers into women's language that those who have concentrated their research on the language used by women instead of the language used by virtually everyone when talking about women have made extensive use of tape-recorded interview situations. For as Labov has pointed out, most linguists have been slow to admit the virtues of the tape recorder, saying that

> Most linguistic students in graduate departments have access to an aged Wollensak, if that, and have gotten no grasp of the difficult art of making good recordings. It would be fair to say that a lack of professional orientation towards equipment has been a serious impediment in the development of the study of a language in everyday life. The only serious relation to instrumentation is found

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> among phoneticians, and the general impression holds that good recordings are important only in the laboratory. But in actual fact, much better recording techniques are needed for the study of grammar than for phonology, even better equipment is needed for the analysis of discourse in ordinary interaction. (1972:110)

To my knowledge, video-taping has been little used in women's language research, but we may assume that such research will eventually be carried out. Eubanks has pointed out its necessity for determining cues which signal beginnings and ends of conversations (1975:9).

Given the virtues of tape-recorded interviews--and they have been documented by dialect geographers as well as by sociolinguists--I have found it appropriate to turn my attention to the question of whether and how data from dialect surveys may provide insights into important questions about how women's language operates. The taped collections include the various Linguistic Atlas of the United States and Canada projects, the Dictionary of American English project, the Arkansas Language Survey, and smaller individual projects, many done for doctoral dissertations.

I have done so with the full knowledge that such collections were made for very different purposes than those which interest me here. My purposes have, in some ways, been like those of certain anthropological studies, e.g. Elliott Liebow's Tally's Corner (1967), which have attempted to make sense after the fact. These

investigations have been conducted without benefit either of prior "specific hypotheses or firm presumptions of relevance" (Liebow 1967: 12). Such procedures have been criticized as post factum sociological interpretations, and one critic has said that explanations which result from such procedures "remain at the level of plausibility (low evidential value) rather than leading to 'compelling evidence' (a high degree of confirmation)" and, further, that "the documentary evidence merely illustrates rather than tests the theory" (Merton 1957:147-149). I agree with Liebow that

> It can be argued . . . that the timing of hypothesis formulation is irrelevant; that regardless of whether hypotheses are generated pre or post factum, the test of their validity always rests on future replication; and that the only proper restrictions on the generation of hypotheses or explanations is that they fit the data. (p. 12)

My assumption has been that tape-recorded interviews from dialect surveys may provide information about phonology, morphology, syntax and also information which will shed light on such matters as how male-female interruption patterns differ, how male-female voice-over habits differ, and how male-female hesitation markers differ. Some of these matters can be examined in any taped interview of reasonable quality. Those involving conversational interaction, however, can be examined only in interview situations which are truly conversational in nature. Most of the interviews done for the Linguistic Atlas projects are thus useless for those purposes. Despite assertions to the contrary (Kurath et al. 1939:45-46, Pederson 1972:8) those interviews are not conversational;

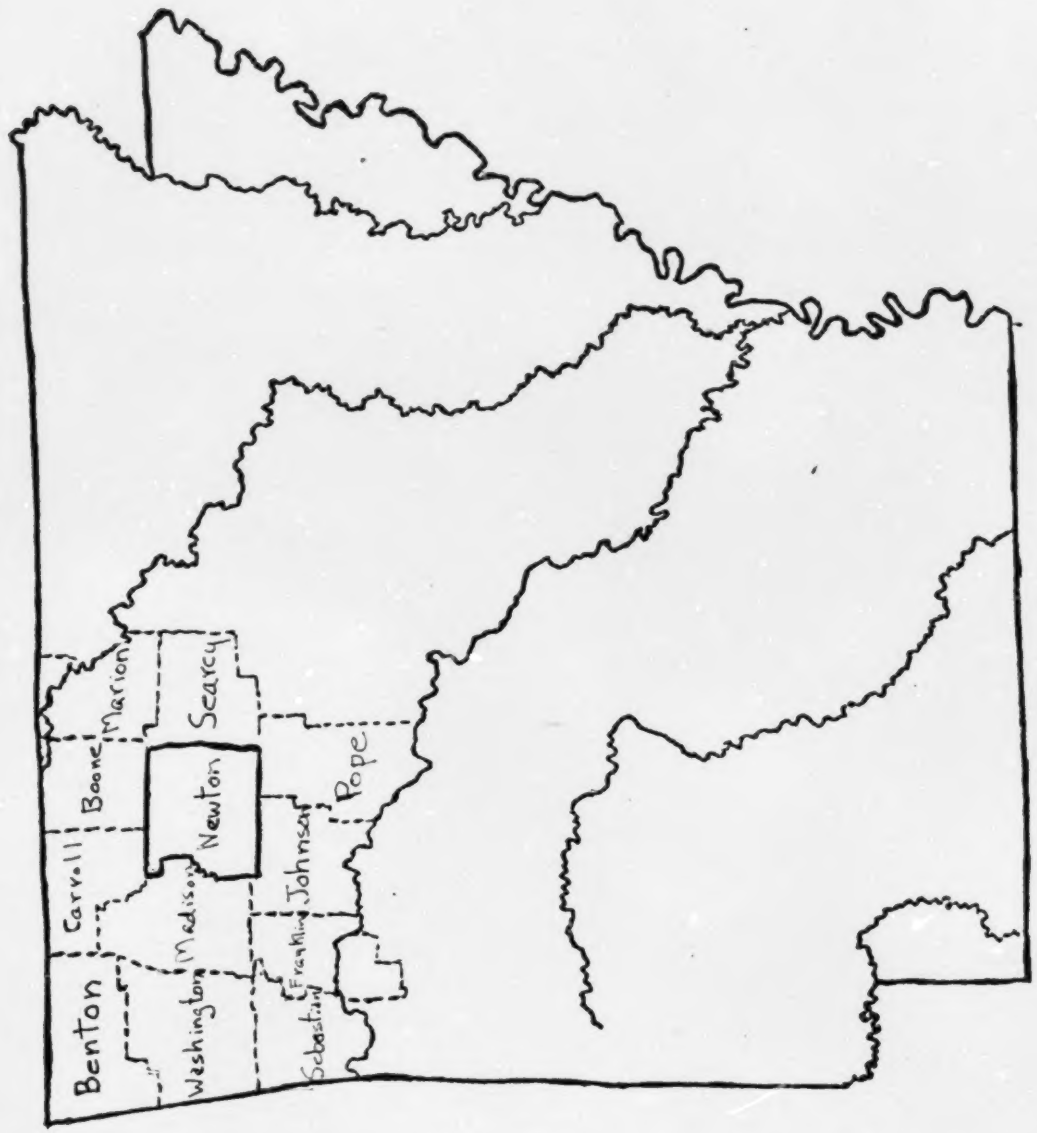
as Underwood has pointed out, "close attention to an atlas interview reveals that it more closely resembles a test than it does a conversation" (1974:128). In fact, while it is possible that some useful data may be obtained from interviews in which there is conversation between the interviewer and the subject, such interviews will, or certainly should, be rare. It is axiomatic in fieldwork that the more skillful the interviewer, the less she will be heard on the tape. There remains one source of information from dialect surveys about male-female conversational interaction cues; that is the interview in which a second person of the opposite sex from the subject, often a spouse, is present as a contributing informant, either supplementary or auxiliary. The former description is used whenever the second person makes a substantial contribution to the record; the latter is used to designate a second person who makes only scattered and occasional contributions to the interview.

To test the extent to which such dialect data can be fruitfully examined for information about male-female differences in conversational interaction, I began listening to and transcribing in modified orthography selected tapes from a collection of twenty tapes made in Newton County, Arkansas, in 1970. The rest of this paper summarizes the history and present state of my research.

Newton County (see figure 1) is a relatively restricted geographical area in the Ozark Mountains comprising entirely rural and small-town habitation patterns, with no centers which may be characterized as urban. The entire population is white and predominantly "Anglo-Saxon" and Protestant. Approximately half the

Figure 1

Counties of Northwest Arkansas



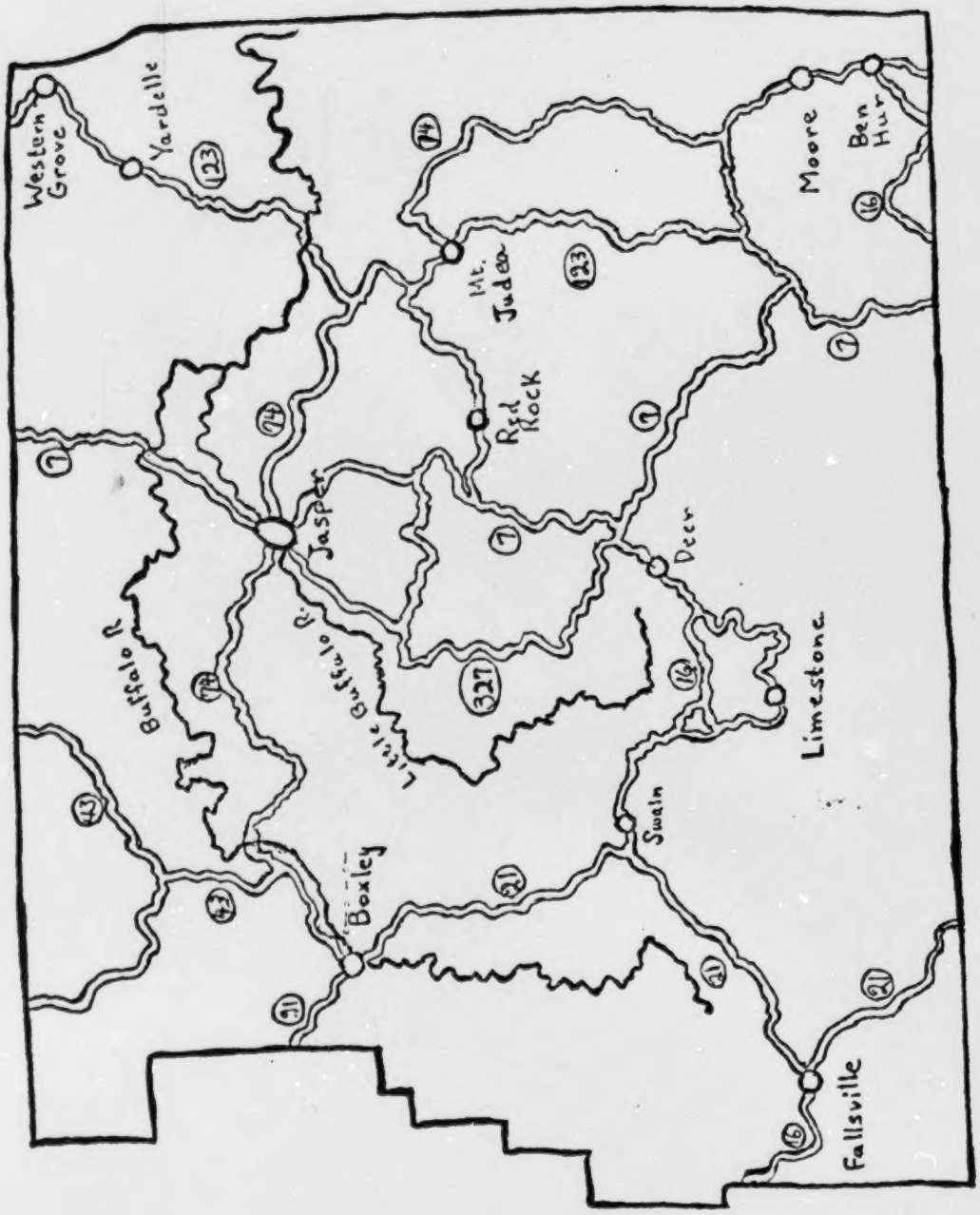
Dumas 1971 ("Appendix")

population receive welfare assistance in some form, and the sample interviewed contains a high percentage of what has been referred to as "that neglected group, poor white women." Because the survey done there (Dumas 1971) had as one of its aims the discovery of the speech patterns of the population of Newton County as a whole, rather than of primarily the older members of the population, the criteria used for selecting informants were somewhat different from those used in studies like the Linguistic Atlas projects and the Dictionary of American Regional English project. Great attention was paid to older informants, particularly those who had travelled little, but other types of informants were also included. However, the older informants--Atlas Type I A, in each case--were most productive for my purpose, primarly because older, old-fashioned informants were most likely to provide a situation in which the spouse, male or female, was present as either a supplementary or auxiliary informant. To date, I have made heaviest use of interviews eleven and five, each of which also involved a supplementary informant who was a spouse.

The first couple, recorded in interview eleven, are from the community of Moore, for all practical purposes a part of Ben Hur, in the southeast corner of the county (see figure 2); its degree of isolation may be measured by the fact that electricity became available in the area only in January of 1970. It also has the smallest post office building in the state of Arkansas, and the last store went out of business there 27 years ago. The following description of Ben Hur appeared in the Arkansas Gazette for November 8, 1972;

Figure 2

Newton County



Dumas 1971 ("Appendix")

it was written by a columnist who had driven to Ben Hur to find out what changes electricity had made.

> Ben Hur is a nice place, but unless you're an escaped convict, it's [sic] accessibility leaves something to be desired. We drove in by way of state Highway 16, which the Highway Department mapped out by following a stray cow . . . .
>
> Getting an old Buick into Ben Hur on Highway 16 during a deluge is comparable to getting an old mule to work on his normal day off, and I hesitated to ask it to ferry us back along the same route. Keesee, studying the map (upside down, it turned out), proposed a shortcut.
>
> That "shortcut" led us through regions of the Ozarks which I'd never seen before and which I doubt any other white man--excepting possibly Joe Hildebrand--had seen before, either. The country up there was so remote that helicopters had to be used to set the power poles for Ben Hur's electric line, so remote that the paper companies haven't even been in yet to cut all the hardwood trees. (Lancaster:1B)

The couple's vitae follow:

> Informant 11. Housewife. 65; native; b. Johnson County, Arkansas. Both parents b. near Moore. PGF and PGM b. on nearby Richland Creek.
>
> She went through all but two weeks of the eight grades of school available in the neighborhood. She had to quit early to help her father in the fields. In recounting the story, she recalled saying to her father, "Daddy, I'd loved to went two

more weeks." His reply had been, "I know, honey, but my fodder'll be all burnt up by then." She married at the age of sixteen; she and her husband have eight children. Assembly of God.

Supplementary Informant. Husband. Farmer and preacher. 78; native; b. in Pope County. Both parents b. near Moore. PGF and PGM b. in Tennessee. His experiences and attitudes are very similar to those of his wife. He takes great delight in walking and hitch-hiking (neither drives) around the county. "I never met a stranger," he insists. He talked freely about his moonshining neighbors . . . , confiding that because they usually mind their own business, they make very fine neighbors. (Dumas 1971:55-56)

The second couple, recorded in interview five, are from Mt. Judea, a community north and slightly west of Ben Hur (see figure 2). It consists of a post office, a general store, a school, and a few homes. The couple's vitae follow:

Informant 5. Craftsman (makes hand-tooled cane bottom chairs of native woods). 78; native; b. Mt. Judea. F and M b. Mt. Judea. Paternal grandparents came from Tennessee. Maternal grandparents came from Alabama.

He has been a farmer, a laborer (road construction), and a lumber man. He begins his furniture-making process with whole trees which he purchases standing from the Forest Service. He had eight years of local schooling. He learned furniture-making from his father at the age of twelve. His only travel has been to neighboring states. Assembly of God.

Supplementary Informant. Wife. 78; native; b. Branson, Missouri. Outspoken, but usually agrees with her husband's opinions. She particularly enjoyed recounting stories of her school days, which were spend in Newton County. (Dumas 1971:56-57)

I began my examination of the data, as I have said, by listening to and transcribing the conversational parts of the interviews. The format I have used is essentially that of Hirschman (1972), with the addition of the third speaker, the interviewer. I have not yet made full transcriptions of these two interviews, nor am I ready to report to you final results with respect to my working hypotheses, which were these: (1) males talk more than females in conversational situations; (2) males tend to control conversations by signalling beginnings and ends of conversations; (3) males make more judgmental, analytical statements; (4) males and females signal their perceived roles by their use of standard and non-standard verbal forms; and (5) females make more rewarding and encouraging remarks or show agreement or indecision. I am indebted to Hirschman (1972) and Eubanks (1975) for the formulation of these hypotheses. They are the same ones examined by them in their research, and there are obvious attractions in the possiblity of examining the same hypotheses in different kinds of elicitation situations.

My hesitation at reporting results comes from three factors. First of all, my preliminary investigation suggests that men and women interact conversationally in these interviews quite differently

depending upon whether they are playing the role of primary informant or supplementary informant. It appears, that is, that for these Newton County residents the perceived role is the crucial one in determining conversational interaction cues, at least before a friendly stranger, the interviewer. It further appears that the perceived role is in this circumstance and for these factors independent of sex. Until I have transcribed and examined the conversational portions of all interviews in which a spouse was present as a contributing informant, I can draw no firm conclusions about this matter. Tentatively, however, it appears that informants generally feel free to interrupt the interviewer or the supplementary informant, to initiate conversation on a new topic, to tell the supplementary informant to be quiet, and to claim superior knowledge about matters of vocabulary, etc., regardless of whether they are men or women. Thus the evidence so far supports Labov's contention that certain differences between the speech of middle-class women and that of middle-class men, specifically their husbands, do not exist in rural or lower-class urban groups (1971:207-8). This is contrary to what I had expected to discover, of course, and needs further study. If this turns out to be generally true, it will be interesting to consider whether the interview situation itself contributes to a different self-perception of the informant. The interviewer's initial instructions to the informant contain such statements as this: "Speak from your own experience, because the only right answers to the questions are the ones which strike you as being right." However, it does not seem likely that in a long

interview in casual style, which is what most of the Newton County interviews are, an informant could maintain the use of language habits normally foreign to her.

But this consideration led to my becoming increasingly aware that the overall structure of the interview situation was not being given sufficient attention. In any human situation, the socio-linguistic whole is greater than the sum of its parts. As I became more and more aware of the extent to which these structured interviews have general rules of their own, I became increasingly dissatisfied with the procedure I had set out to follow, namely that of counting such items as the signals which begin and end conversations, the number of judgmental, analytical statements made by males and females, the number of times statements were phrased as questions, and the number of times encouraging remarks were made by a speaker's showing agreement or indecision. Thus it now seems to me imperative to write the rules for conversation in these interview situations before attempting to analyze differences in male-female conversational interaction cues. This will necessitate making a complete transcription of all the relevant tapes and examining them closely in order to formulate general rules of discourse in such a situation. Only then can the transcriptions be examined for differences depending on sex.

Third, the specialized nature of the relationships between the male-female pairs in this study must be taken into consideration. We may assume that the conversational interaction cues of males and females interacting together will vary according to the relationship of the two individuals. At the moment, it seems likely that differences which exist for a large part of the population are practically non-

existent for older, rural inhabitants in isolated areas, particularly if they are married to each other.

In summary, then, I would like to re-affirm my conviction that as research on sex-based language difference continues, and as research priorities and design and methodology are set, researchers should not overlook potentially productive examination of existing data. Neither, however, should they fail to take full account of the sociolinguistic factors at play in existing records. Single-style elicitation techniques, such as that used in the Linguistic atlas projects, should be recognized as such, and test-situations should not be confused with conversation. Both male and female responses in one-to-one, interviewer-informant approaches vary according to age, sex, ethnicity, and style. In potentially bi-lingual or trilingual situations, common in the U. S. Southwest, they will vary according to the language capabilities of the inter-viewer and of the informant, particularly, perhaps, when they are different (Dumas 1975:15-18). Finally, it is crucial that relation-ships among conversational partners be recognized for what they are. Most studies to date have been quite limited in respect to this last point. The studies carried out by both Hirschman and Eubanks involve only college students, some of whom had been strangers to each other prior to the interview. The study I have reported on will involve primarily older married couples. These studies are important, but they should eventually be supplemented by studies which examine male-female linguistic behavior in a variety of contexts and in terms of a variety of other variables. If we do the ground work carefully, we can expect such research to follow in due time.

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